

setting the standards

I thought that this issue I'd write about European Standards, since that is something that happens on the other side of the world, and is therefore of absolutely no relevance whatsoever to anybody in Australia. Or so you might think.

Some background. When the decision to form the European Union was reached, one of the outcomes was a decision to harmonise the laws, regulations and standards of the member countries. And thus CEN (loosely translates from the French as the Committee for European Standardisation) was born.

They established many technical committees on a wide range of topics, including TC246 on Natural Stone. Each member country can nominate a representative to this technical committee. The committee then establishes sub-committees, or task groups. These are filled with members nominated by each country, usually with special expertise or knowledge pertaining to the relevant task group.

The two main areas of work for TC246 on Natural Stone are as follows:

- test methods
- specifications for products

TC246 has been working on harmonising natural stone standards in Europe for over 10 years now, and as you would have seen in the last issue, they have published a range of standards. These are mainly test methods. The specifications, or product requirements, are in draft form, but are taking longer to get through the balloting process.

Their approach in the first instance was to review all of the standards that existed across Europe in the various member countries. And so the British (BS), the German (DIN), the French, Spanish, Italian, Belgian and Dutch all put their various standards on the table for consideration. Almost all of these were test methods. Then they sat around and argued about whose method was best. Eventually, they decided that they couldn't reach consensus, so they would publish most of the test methods as European standards!! And this is another reason why TC246 have completed many test methods, but are still working on specifications.

The specifications, or product requirements, that TC246 is planning to publish, include:

- prEN 1467 Natural stone - Rough blocks - Specifications
- prEN 1468 Natural stone - Rough slabs - Specifications
- prEN 1469 Natural stone - Finished products, slabs for cladding - Specifications
- prEN 12057 Natural stone - Finished products, modular tiles - Specifications
- prEN 12058 Natural stone - Finished products, slabs for floors and stairs - Specifications
- prEN 12059 Natural stone - Dimensional stone works - Specifications

In addition, there are a number of specifications that will be published by other committees relating to the use of stone as roof slates, or as kerbs, gutters, or paving.

Now, why is this all relevant to us down here in Australia. Two reasons, both to do with the fact that stone is a global business.

Firstly, within the next few years, any natural stone bought or sold in Europe will have to conform to the European standards. That means that all testing will have to be done in accordance with the European standard test methods, and all products (including quarry blocks, sawn slabs, fabricated units and tiles) will have to meet the European standard specifications. So for Australian businesses wanting to sell into Europe, it will be important to have testing in accordance with European standard test methods, and ensure their products meet the European standard specifications. Further, any technical data provided by European fabricators or quarries will be related to the European test methods, few of which can be directly compared with the ASTM test methods with which we are more familiar here in Australia.

This will have a significant cost. Our test laboratories are all set up to carry out ASTM test methods, for these have been the well-established and globally recognised standards for the past two decades. In addition, there is already much test data according to the ASTM test methods on many of the Australian stones. However, in order to meet European standards, our laboratories will have to invest in equipment and procedures to test to the European test methods, and our suppliers will have to invest in extensive testing of their stones in accordance with the European test methods. Specifiers will have to learn what the European test methods are, and what they mean with regard to likely performance of different stones in use.

The second reason arises because as yet, there are no ISO standards for dimension stone. A technical committee was established (TC196) during the 1980s, but when CEN established TC246, they reached an agreement with ISO TC196 that there would be no work on ISO standards until the CEN standards had been published. The unwritten agreement underlying this is that when the CEN standards have been in operation for several years, ISO will seek to adopt them as international standards. The nature of the balloting process is that because the European nations each get one vote at ISO, it is most unlikely that any significant changes will be achieved due to the limited number of opposing votes that might be able to be garnered amongst American and Asian nations.

And then once the ISO standards are published, it is Australian policy that we will adopt them as Australian standards. And hence without any input from us, without any choice or influence in the standards, we will acquire a set of standards for natural stone that will be accepted in at least half the world. Sounds like good value to me - something for nothing. Of course, the downside is that we will be forced to conform to the European standards which might not be appropriate for all of our stone types (particularly I suspect our porous limestones and some of our sandstones).

For both of these reasons, it is important that we start thinking about how we want to respond to this issue. Now is the time for



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us to decide whether we want European standards or ASTM standards as the future international and Australian standards. And if we want ASTM standards, then we need to begin lobbying our Asian colleagues so that they will join us on ISO TC196 and work hard (for it will be hard work) towards achieving truly global harmonisation between the ASTM and the CEN dimension stone standards.

Of course, given what I've seen from the Australian industry over the past decade or so, my prediction is that within the next decade, we'll have a great set of Australian standards on dimension stone that just happens to resemble very closely the current European standards on natural stone.

Let me know which way you think the Australian industry should go. And whether it is worth spending money trying to get harmonised standards ... or whether we should sit by and wait for the European standards to become Australian standards. You can reach me via the editor of Discovering Stone, or by email to: david.west@hyder.com.au

This is the second of a series of columns on the standards writing process. Next issue I'm intending to comment on coming changes to the Australian standards for masonry units and segmental pavers, and the impact they will have on our industry. The Editor will also print an updated list of dimension stone standards in the next issue as a reference tool. If anybody knows of other useful standards, let me know and we'll incorporate them.

References:

- 1 <http://www.cenorm.be>
- 2 <http://www.standards.com.au>
- 3 <http://www.astm.org>
- 4 <http://bsonline.technindex.co.uk>

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